

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

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MEMORANDUMREACTIONS TO A POSSIBLE SHIFT OF US FORCES TO THE
PERSIAN GULF/INDIAN OCEAN AREA

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Summary

While West European, Middle Eastern, and Pacific states would see a shift of US naval and marine forces into the Indian ocean area as evidence of US determination to counter recent Soviet actions in South Asia, they would worry that a drawdown of forces from near their shores might accentuate perceptions of US political overextension and military weakness.

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A shift of strength from the Mediterranean would cause concern in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. The West Europeans believe that the current level of US forces in the Mediterranean is vital to NATO's vulnerable southern flank. The West Europeans themselves are not able or willing to take up the slack caused by a permanent US drawdown. North African moderates would worry that a drawdown from the Mediterranean would make the area more vulnerable to Soviet and radical Arab influence, a perception probably shared--and welcomed--by radical Arab states. Israel, while having some qualms about a Mediterranean drawdown, would welcome an increased US presence in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean.

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*This memorandum, requested by the National Security Council, was prepared by [redacted] Western Europe Division; John Helgerson, Near East-South Asia Division; and [redacted] East Asia-Pacific Division, all of the Office of Political Analysis. The paper was coordinated with the Office of Strategic Research and the National Intelligence Officers for Western Europe, Near East-South Asia, and East Asia-Pacific. Research was completed on 10 March 1980. Questions and comments may be addressed to the Chief of the Regional Organizations Branch of the Western Europe Division, Office of Political Analysis, [redacted]

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Should US forces be shifted from the Pacific, countries in that area would worry about perceptions of US military deficiency and would request counterbalancing measures--such as military and economic aid--to build up their own defense forces. The Pacific states might also want a US guarantee that the shifted forces would be replaced in the near future.

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The European allies recognize that problems in areas bordering on the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean are of increasing importance to Alliance security, but they would have problems with a permanent shift of US forces to this region from NATO's vulnerable southern flank.

- Such a shift could not take place under NATO auspices, given the West European allies' opposition to deploying NATO forces outside traditional areas of operation.
- Some allies might oppose a Mediterranean drawdown on the grounds that the US would be weakening its presence on NATO's southern flank even as Soviet operations in the Mediterranean are increasing.
- The continuing Arab-Israeli imbroglio and uncertainty about the effect of Tito's death on the balance in Eastern Mediterranean would make the West Europeans uneasy about a US shift.
- There might also be some concern that a shift of US forces to the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean would increase the possibility of US military action that might ultimately have repercussions in Europe as well.

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Although the United Kingdom, and France have unilaterally shown their flags in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, they are probably neither willing nor able to replace US power in the Mediterranean.

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British Prime Minister Thatcher sent warships on a Mediterranean and Indian Ocean cruise and probably would be willing to increase British forces in the area if US forces were reduced. Although a permanent increase in British forces in the Mediterranean is unlikely, an increased British presence east of Suez--which was reduced sharply after 1971--is under active consideration and has held up publication of the 1980 Defense White Paper. It is possible that Britain could permanently increase its presence in the Indian Ocean to augment a US buildup.

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France has shown itself capable of projecting forces in Africa and the Middle East. Since the Yom Kippur War, both French aircraft carriers have been assigned to the Mediterranean fleet. It is difficult to see how the French could beef up their Mediterranean presence further, particularly since the French defense budget is already strained by ambitious nuclear programs. Whether France would be willing to meld its interests with those of the Alliance is questionable. President Giscard would face domestic political problems if he appeared to be coordinating Mediterranean policy with NATO and the United States. [redacted]

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West Germany will send warships on a training expedition to the Indian Ocean, but establishing a regular Mediterranean naval presence would pose political problems. Historical and emotional opposition to West German military power runs deep in Europe, and the West Germans are wary of taking the lead on important Alliance military issues. Bonn is concerned about the weakness of NATO's southern flank and considers its leading role in aiding Turkey as a significant contribution to Alliance security. West Germany probably would oppose a shift in US forces, particularly if it concluded that such a shift would seriously weaken Alliance strength in the eastern Mediterranean. [redacted]

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Italy's chronic economic problems preclude a major role in replacing US forces in the area. The Italians consider the Mediterranean to be the hinge of the Alliance and share general West European concern for NATO's southern flank. Rome appreciates recent increases in British activity in the region and would not favor a US drawdown. [redacted]

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Greece and Turkey are the least likely--and least capable--replacements for US power. Any decrease in US forces in the Mediterranean would upset Turkish military leaders and the Turkish Government, while at the same time giving Turkey a new justification to plead for increased military aid. Greece remains outside NATO's integrated command structure and thus faces procedural as well as economic obstacles to strengthening its Alliance contribution. Furthermore, the NATO plan for Greek reintegration, which calls for a US zone of responsibility between Greek and Turkish forces in the Mediterranean, might be called into question by a decrease in US Mediterranean forces. [redacted]

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Middle East Perceptions

The moderate North African states--Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco--would be concerned that a drawdown of US forces in the Mediterranean would leave that region more vulnerable to Soviet and radical Arab influence. They would worry particularly that Libya would be even more active in fomenting subversion in the coming months, as in its recent attempt to promote rebellion in Tunisia. Morocco and Tunisia probably would look increasingly to France to help provide protection from such threats. [redacted]

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Egypt's foremost security concern at the moment, however, is with the Soviet threat in the Persian Gulf/Red Sea/Indian Ocean area. On balance, Egyptian officials probably would understand such a force shift and view it as further evidence of Washington's determination to counter Soviet actions in those areas. Egypt has demonstrated a willingness to provide help to moderate Arab states threatened by foreign subversion. There are, however, both political and material constraints on the magnitude of the security role Egypt can play in the Mediterranean area. Its naval force in particular is weak and could do little to take up the slack created by a drawdown of US forces. [redacted]

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The radical Arab states of the Mediterranean littoral-Libya, Algeria, and Syria--will welcome any drawdown of US forces in the Mediterranean. They will, however, view any corresponding increase in US strength in the Indian Ocean as a threat to area states and will attempt to marshal opposition to an increased likelihood that the US will occupy Persian Gulf oilfields. Since the radical states give lipservice to the notion that the Mediterranean should be free of superpower influence, they should also oppose increased Soviet activity there. In fact, they are willing to give the Soviet Union considerably more leeway than they give the US. The three have recently demonstrated their willingness to condone even the Soviet move into Afghanistan, although Algeria has expressed private reservations. [redacted]

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The Israelis would welcome any buildup of US forces in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean as reflecting US determination to stand up to the Soviets in the region. Tel Aviv has long maintained that Moscow represents the major long-term threat to the stability of the area and to continued Western access to Gulf oil. The Israelis would prefer that US forces be augmented from the Pacific, fearing that the Soviets or the radical Arabs would exploit a weakened US presence in the Mediterranean. The Israelis would be willing to help the US compensate for a drawdown of forces, but the country's small navy would limit its contribution. Tel Aviv some time ago extended an open invitation to the US to use Israeli port facilities. [redacted]

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The Pacific Theater

The reactions of countries in the Pacific region to a Persian Gulf/Indian Ocean permanent US military force, accomplished by a subsequent drawdown of forces in the Pacific theater, would be heavily influenced by perceptions of an enhanced Soviet threat in the Pacific following the Afghanistan invasion. On the one hand, Pacific countries would welcome the establishment of such a force as a manifestation of the new US resolve to halt Soviet expansionism. On the other hand, any drawdown of US forces in the Pacific would accentuate existing perceptions of current US military deficiencies unless it is immediately counterbalanced both by substantial

military and economic assistance to enable Pacific countries to build up their own defense forces and by a credible guarantee that forces drawn off will be replaced in the near future.* Timing would be crucial: Pacific countries might fear that the vacuum left by the US drawdown could be exploited by the Soviets or Asian Communist countries--for example a Vietnamese invasion of Thailand or a North Korean incursion into the South. At present non-Communist Asian military forces are inadequate to substitute for the US deterrent. [redacted]

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Undoubtedly the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan reinforced fears of the Soviet threat to the Pacific region. Many countries are now prepared to modify their defense policies because of an increased convergence of defense interests with the US to meet the expanded threat. Pacific countries--including Japan, which sees its vital interests (i.e., the passage of oil) at stake in Southeast Asia--equate the Afghanistan invasion with the Soviet-supported Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea. The growing availability of Vietnam's warm-water ports to the Soviet navy in its movements between the Persian Gulf/Indian Ocean and Vladivostok has heightened fears of a year-round Soviet danger to Pacific sea lanes. The East Asian and Pacific countries thus have a new awareness of the strategic interdependence between the Pacific theater and Southwest Asia and, concomitantly, of the deficiencies of existing defense arrangements. [redacted]

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The way Pacific states adapt their defense policies will vary from country to country, but will be largely determined by the speed and effectiveness of the US in implementing its policy of firmness so that it represents a durable and consistent deterrent to Soviet expansionism. Most countries are consequently pursuing a wait-and-see policy and are unwilling to appear "out front" lest there is a US drawback in the face of Soviet power. Many states, for example, believe that the US commitment to Southeast Asia diminished following Hanoi's victory in 1975 and that US military strength has weakened over the past five years. At present they doubt that they can rely on the US in the event of a crisis in Northeast Asia or Indochina should the US be involved concurrently in military action in the Middle East or elsewhere. [redacted]

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Furthermore, many countries--especially ASEAN members and South Korea--variously see the lack of US commitment since 1975 reflected in the diminution of bilateral programs, including foreign military sales, military assistance and PL 480 grain shipments. Japan and South Korea were also concerned over the US announcement of troop withdrawals from South Korea. Human rights criticisms, too, caused many

*If a carrier and Marine Amphibious Unit were involved in the drawdown, tactical air force units deployed in South Korea or on Okinawa, together with rapid reinforcement exercises on the lines of REFORGER exercises to Western Europe, would help alleviate fears. There is no realistic substitute, however, for a US carrier on station. [redacted]

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states to question US priorities. Most Pacific countries fear that an increase in US military assistance to the Middle East and Southwest Asia will result in a proportional decrease in the Pacific region. Any drawdown of existing forces, therefore, would underline fears of the US lack of military preparedness and, over the short haul, might detract from the willingness of some Pacific states--Japan apart--to cooperate more actively with the US on defense issues. [redacted]

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In practical terms a massive amount of military aid and a lengthy period of time would be required before states in the Pacific region could on their own represent a credible military deterrent to Communist adventurism and substitute for US forces. South Korea possesses the most powerful military force in non-Communist Asia, but it would find it difficult to repel a full-scale Communist attack. Japan's Self Defense Forces are adequate only for short-term conventional purposes in the immediate vicinity of Japan, and in any case Japan is prevented by its constitution from sending forces outside its borders. Australian and New Zealand forces require reinforcing and reorganizing before they could offer significant help to the US in Southeast Asia or the Indian Ocean. ASEAN forces are woefully inadequate across the board except for counterinsurgency capabilities. [redacted]

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China has a vast standing army that helps deter the Vietnamese from invading Thailand. China's February 1979 invasion of Vietnam, however, pointed up its military deficiencies and the need for extensive modernization. Any attempt by the US to provide some of China's defense needs--or to engage in any significant defense cooperation--would alarm ASEAN states like Malaysia and Indonesia, which, because of domestic considerations, have residual suspicions of China's long-term expansionist objectives. Any US attempt to involve Japan's military forces elsewhere in the Pacific could revive fears of Japanese militarism. Efforts to strengthen Japan's forces for self-defense, however, would not excite alarm. [redacted]

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Finally, Malaysia and Indonesia are members of the Islamic Conference and have significant Muslim populations. The establishment of a permanent US military force in the Persian Gulf/Indian Ocean area would probably raise fears that it might be directed against Muslim states such as Iran. Thus they would worry that US military intervention in the Middle East might have repercussions inside Malaysia and Indonesia, undermine governmental stability, and seriously impair their ability to cooperate with the US on defense matters. [redacted]

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